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ABSTRACT

There are two good reasons for incorporating historical linguistic insight into second language instruction: (1) to answer students' questions about why certain puzzling facts and irregularities occur in the language they are studying; and (2) as in other disciplines, a historical perspective can shed light on current practice. From a historical perspective, it can be seen that many suspected irregularities in the language being studied are not really irregular at all, a fact that is interesting and satisfying to students. While long explanation and coverage of all grammatical points from a historical viewpoint is not recommended, common questions raised by students may be addressed with brief historical accounts. Some of these answers may also have practical value in facilitating the learning of correct grammatical forms. The use of historical linguistic information can replace the typical inaccurate, uninteresting, and unhelpful responses so often given to students who question the patterns in a target language. (MSE)

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THE APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL LINGUISTIC INFORMATION TO THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Thirty-five years ago, with regard to bettering the preparation of the language teacher, Pulgram (1954:78) wrote:

> Let the prospective language teacher become acquainted with the important linguistic facts of life; let him take good courses in general linguistics and in the descriptive and historical study of the language he wants to teach.

But the information which has been made available to the language teacher and subsequently applied to the classroom has come from synchronic analysis alone; that is, what Pulgram referred to as the "descriptive" study of the language in question. Linguists, applied as well as historical, have ignored the second half of Pulgram's proposal as regards the applicability and usefulness of such historical linguistic information in the classroom. It is in an attempt to resume the second half of Pulgram's proposal, and in the hope that language teachers will find my suggestions useful, that I urge all foreign language teachers to become familiar with, and to implement, the available historical information to the foreign language classroom.

Now, one might ask, why bother? Don't students have enough information to deal with when learning a second language? True enough. But there are two good reasons for incorporating historical insight into our teaching routines. First, students often ask the question "Why?" regarding certain puzzling facts and "irregularities" of the foreign language they are studying. Second, it is well known, and therefore practiced in other areas of study (e.g., sociology, government, etc.) that for a good understanding of the present state of affairs, a look at the history of the situation in question is desirable, if indeed not indispensable. Why, then, should the study of a foreign language be any different?

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I raise these two points from experience, as a student of Spanish, as a teacher of Spanish, and as a language historian. As a student myself, I asked my teachers many questions, to which I received a response like, "That's just the way it is, learn it!", "It's just irregular", or "No me preguntes por qué". I did not find these "explanations" very satisfying. As a language historian, I have found that many of the so-called "irregularities", from a historical perspective, are not really irregular at all. Furthermore, as a teacher of Spanish, I have found that students find these brief, historically oriented answers not only interesting, but a lot more satisfying than a response like, "That's just the way it is, learn it!", "It's just irregular", or "No me preguntes por qué". Before I continue, I would like to make clear that I am not advocating long explanations, nor that all grammar points be taught from a historical perspective. Below we will review some common questions which can be answered briefly.

I would like to demonstrate first, however, the explanatory nature of historical analysis. The nature of synchronic analysis, i.e., analysis of a language at one given point in time, (usually the modern language), is such that it describes, i.e., it provides a description or statement of the facts of the modern language. Diachronic or historical analysis, on the other hand, explains how these facts came to be as they are. Let us look at one example. Synchronically, we can state that the pronouns le/les become se when appearing before lo, la, los, las. Without looking historically, we might try to account for this phenomenon with unfounded, ad hoc explanations like, "le lo sounds bad", or "le lo means 'stupid'". Historically, however, we find that this phenomenon resulted from a series of phonological changes:
ILLI ILLUM > li ellu > ljelo > ʎelo > želo > šelo > ślo
(by analogy to reflexive se and confusion of ś and ś).
(Revised from Lathrop 1984:156-57).

Now let us look at some of the common questions raised by students regarding "irregularities" which can be answered with brief historical accounts.

(1) Why do ser and ir have the same form in the preterite? First, it is really the preterite of the verb ser used for both verbs. Ser was often used in Old Spanish where estar is now used: so that fui a casa meant "I was at home". Then ensued a shift in meaning; in order to be at a particular place, one first had to go there. Thus fui a casa = "I was at home" > "I went home".

(2) Why does the imperfect of ver retain the stem vowel? Because in Old Spanish the verb was veer, like leer and creer. Thus we have in Modern Spanish veía, like leía and creía. OSp. veer later contracted to ver while leer and creer did not.

The explanations above are of the type students find interesting. Others, like the following, are not only interesting, but hold a practical value.

(1) Why do all three conjugations have the same endings in the future? (This phenomenon applies to all Romance languages). Because the future forms are really a combination of the infinitive + the verb haber (OSp. aver). Haber was used in place of (or interchangeably with) tener. If one said he/she had to do something, this obligation carried an implied futurity. Again, there was a shift in meaning: hablar é con él "I have to speak with him" > "I will speak with him". Thus, the practical aspect of this explanation is that the students, already knowing the forms of haber (for the present perfect) now know the endings for the future (by taking of the h-) without having to re-memorize them.

(2) Why is the masculine definite article used for nouns beginning with a stressed a, e.g., el agua, but las aguas; el águila, las águilas, etc.? First, students must realize that it is not the masculine definite article. Rather, it is the first half of the feminine article from Latin: ILLA AQUA > ila agua > ela agua > elaagua > el agua. But, ILLAS AQUAS > ilas aguas > elas aguas > las aguas. Thus, if students realize that historically this is not the masculine definite article, they will not confuse the gender of the noun when modifying it, i.e., el agua pura, not *el agua puro (unlike el poema épico, un poeta famoso etc.).

(3) Giving the Latin base too for the "irregular" past participles will facilitate the learning of correct forms through association with English derivatives. In these cases, the infinite offers no clue to the formation of the past participle.

Infinitive	Spanish	Latin	English derivatives
morir	muerto	mortu(u)m	mortuary, mortician
poner	puesto	positum	position, posit, post
ver	visto	vis(t)um	vision, visor, visual
escribir	escrito	scriptum	scripture,manu(script)
abrir	abierto	apertum	aperture, apertural

Through the Latin connection, and association with the English derivatives, students will more readily remember the -t- or -st- element of the past participle, thus avoiding the common erros *morido, *ponido, *veído, *escribido, etc.

In conclusion, I maintain that the application of such historical linguistic information will replace the typical inaccurate, uninteresting, and unhelpful responses like those mentioned at the beginning of this paper with enlightening, helpful ones, which will enrich the study of the target language for both the teacher and students alike.

Works Cited

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